

OBITUARY

In memoriam Linnart Mäll

7 June 1938 – 14 February 2010



No one departs this world without leaving a trace. Every person or creature leaves behind a trace that is distinctive in terms of visibility, extent and influence. That trace may be ploughed into the soil of a field or carved in history by stone or the sword. It may, however, also at first glance be less noticeable but more influential than that recorded by plough, stone or sword—that is the case when the trace a person leaves is in the area of culture.

Indeed, *culture* is the most suitable word with which to sum up the life work of Linnart Mäll; Culture with a capital letter. He entered academia in the late 1960s, when the developing Tartu–Moscow school of semiotics raised culture and the concept of cultural texts to prominence. Mäll, who had begun to delve into the investigation of Buddhist Dharma with characteristic ardour and zeal, found great inspiration in the theory and method of cultural semiotics, and as a young man, even before reaching the age of 30, formulated the fundamental principles of a new theory of the Dharma and was quite literally involved in its development until his last breath. This involved the ideas of the Dharma as a text, as something expressed in signs and semiotic systems; the Dharma as a state of consciousness that is transmitted through texts; and finally the Dharma as culture, the human environment created by man himself and in

which we live. These apparently simple claims were, nevertheless, ground-breaking in the area of Buddhist studies and no one had yet expressed them with such brilliant simplicity. Nevertheless, this discovery had another even more important dimension. Against its background, the ancient, over 2000-year-old Buddhist teaching of the Dharma began to appear as a kind of theory of semiotics, leading one to consider the possibility that quite similar ideas could arise at different times and in different cultural situations; while these may be forgotten for long periods, they may unexpectedly re-emerge when the cultural situation becomes ripe for it. This appears to be precisely what happened with the Buddhist theory of the Dharma in the light of contemporary cultural theory. The neologisms 'zerology' and 'lysiology' created by Mäll did not remain merely the young scholar's own play on words, but gave an inkling of the rise of something new in Buddhist studies and cultural research in general and have found application in the works of later researchers in the field.

Linnart Mäll was never a mere theorist. To him a beautiful theory was valuable only to the extent that it advanced the growth of understanding. Having discovered the semiotic mechanism through which the Dharma functions, he undertook to translate and intermediate the texts and culture in which that concept had arisen into Estonian, his native tongue, so that those living in that linguistic and cultural space could also benefit from that ancient wisdom. It is no accident that one of the first published full translations of Buddhist texts by Linnart Mäll was the *Diamond Sūtra*, which is one of the most famous texts of the 'Perfection of Wisdom' cycle of the Mahāyāna Sūtras and which in the Buddhist tradition is commonly referred to as a sūtra that cuts like a diamond through ignorance, stupidity, barbarity, and above all man's fixed attitudes and prejudices. The laconic form and paradoxical structural nature of this text and its uncompromisingly thorough-going analytical treatment is perhaps best suited to Linnart Mäll's own way of thinking and worldview, which was also characterised by an untiring passion for the highest degree of knowledge and truth and an uncompromising nature.

At that time and in that cultural context (the Soviet Union in the 1970s), it was not always expedient to be uncompromising. At Tartu State University in Soviet Estonia, merely studying Eastern religions and wisdom appeared suspicious and unnecessary. That was not the case, however, in peculiarly cosmopolitan Moscow, where Mäll was able to go to study with the assistance and support of liberal but authoritarian Russian academic Nikolai Konrad, and it was there that he became both a specialist in Oriental and Buddhist studies and a dissident. When the infamous trial of his main Buddhist teacher Bidja Dandaron began in Buryatia in the early 1970s, Mäll travelled to Ulan-Ude in defiance of the danger of being arrested and accused as an 'accomplice' and boldly gave evidence in court. That did not save Dandaron from prison and death but

did reveal the absurdity of the trial and most likely reduced the length of Dandaron's sentence. This gave Soviet-leaning bosses and colleagues at Tartu State University a pretext to get rid of the troublesome professor and 'nonconformist' (although the order probably came from higher up and had to be implemented immediately). Having been fired from his teaching position, Mäll was not officially permitted to lecture at the university for about ten years. His doctoral thesis, an analysis of the famous *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* was already complete at that time, but he was only able to defend it in 1985.

The following period in the life of Linnart Mäll can be called nothing less than paradoxical. Despite having been removed from his teaching position (to deny him the possibility of 'spoiling' Soviet youth with his nonconformist ideas), Mäll was nevertheless permitted to continue working at the University of Tartu—as an engineer in the Oriental Studies Department. 'Engineer' was an officially neutral and non-academic position in which the scholar had a relatively free hand to pursue his research interests. Mäll did not have to work with a screwdriver, pincers or a soldering iron in those years, as one might imagine of an engineer in the humanitarian department of a university, but was able to devote himself to research and translation. Decades later he said that the modest engineer's wage could be compared with a present-day stipend or research grant that permitted him to involve himself with the very topics that interested him, without the authorities particularly monitoring or circumscribing him. That was the first paradox.

The second paradox was that his translations into Estonian of very 'exotic' religious texts appeared in what would today be considered to be very large print runs—20,000 and more—and proved to be bestsellers. Everyone read the *Dhammapada*, the *Daodejing*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, Śāntideva's *Bodhicāryāvatāra*, and Confucius' *Analects*. They were quite in fashion. Of course editors encountered difficulties as a result of the publishing of certain texts, but none of them were prohibited from publication, and there are no known cases of texts being removed from sale. It is difficult to overemphasise their influence on the way of thinking of the Estonian intelligentsia and student body in that period.

The third paradox is that although Mäll did not officially possess the right to give lectures, at the end of the 1970s an Oriental studies group arose around him in the framework of the official Students' Academic Society, and this attracted a great amount of interest from students. Thus Mäll, acting as the semi-formal co-instructor of an Oriental studies group, was nevertheless able to 'spoil' those young people quite extensively, by awakening in them a serious interest in Oriental studies that the university's overall academic atmosphere did not favour, and thus several of those young students who began their careers in Oriental studies as enthralled enthusiasts

have now become recognised Orientalists, so that one can speak of Mäll's school in the context of Oriental studies in Estonia. Nor can one neglect to mention the annual alumni colloquia of the Oriental studies group, which brought together hundreds of enthusiasts and went beyond the boundaries of Oriental studies, becoming a kind of forum for alternative free thinking in Estonia.

Perhaps the continuation of contacts between Orientalists from Moscow and Leningrad is not, however, the paradox it may appear to be. The same applies to the Tartu–Moscow school of semiotics. Mäll's articles appeared in almost all semiotics collections published in the Proceedings of the University of Tartu series. It was he, as a recognised leading Buddhism expert in the Soviet Union, who was commissioned to write an extensive article on Buddhist mythology for the prestigious encyclopaedic collection *Myths of the Peoples of the World*, which is continually reprinted even today.

Although he was guided by the Buddhist Dharma theory in his theoretical pursuits, Linnart Mäll's interests were not limited to Buddhism. It was apparently the desire to find deeper meaning in culture and the universals and constants that operate in that sphere that led him to investigate and translate the traditional base texts of other traditions. Later he summed up those pursuits in the theory of humanistic base texts, in which the most influential constant of different cultures (Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, Christian) is indeed expressed in *humanism*. At a certain stage in the development of civilisation, humanity and humanism began to be valued. This idea found its way into various teachings and books of doctrine independently and in different parts of the world. Although the wording is different, these reveal the idea of culture as a particular environment and device of man and humanity. The Confucian *wen*, the Buddhist *dharma*, and the Christian *logos* all find a common denominator in the concept of culture.

Linnart Mäll did not merely investigate or act as an intermediary between Culture and cultures but also sought to ensure that the culture from which he himself originated could develop and improve. This he did both in his direct work and as a politician in the epoch-making years of transition and in the period when Estonia regained its independence. He had no doubts about joining the Estonian National Independence Party. As a representative of the latter party, he was elected to the Estonian Congress and Estonian Committee. He later also participated in the Constitutional Assembly.

Although a nationalist, he never became a narrow-minded type, only focused on promoting Estonian interests, but when possible always tied the advancement of Estonian interests with larger interests, considering that in participating in something bigger than itself, Estonia also becomes bigger. Proceeding from that truth, at a Pan-Europe seminar he formulated the definition of internationalism thus: the union of true nationalists who promote their own nations' interests, while at the same time sympathising with the similar

aspirations of other peoples and supporting each other. In addition to the Pan-Europe movement, another political field in which Mäll was active throughout the 1990s was the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO), of which he was a founding member and also its first chairman. When speaking at UNPO forums and meetings in many parts of the world, he introduced and propagated the idea of positive nationalism and the equality and self-determination of peoples, which finally found expression in the 'Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples', of which he was a principal author and editor. In coordinating the activities of the peoples and nations of the former Soviet Union in the UNPO, Mäll acquired a reputation as 'friend and defender of peoples'. His friendship with Chechen national hero Dzhokhar Dudayev, which began when they both lived in Tartu, took him to war-torn Itshkeria several times. Mäll's activities were naturally not to the liking of the Russian authorities, and he was periodically refused visas for travel to Russia. That only strengthened Mäll's resolve; he said: 'If they won't let me travel there, that means they take me seriously'.

Even in those busy years, Mäll never for a moment neglected his academic and Buddhist activities. As head of the Centre for Oriental Studies at the University of Tartu, he supervised research projects and advised young researchers on their dissertations. His articles and presentations at conferences were published in publications of the field in several countries, and as a result he increased the international scope and fame of Oriental studies in Tartu. It appears that the academic communities in Asian countries like India, China, Japan and Taiwan appear to be most interested in his work and ideas, and he received frequent invitations to conferences and lecture tours from those countries. The prestigious Indian academic publishers Motilal Banarsidass published a collection of Mäll's more substantial works a year after it was first published in Tartu. In Russia many of his works have been reprinted several times. At his initiative, the University of Tartu Oriental Studies series was reinstated under the title 'Studia Orientalia Tartuensia. Series Nova'.

When asked what had inspired him to begin studying Buddhism as a young university student, Mäll once answered that he was motivated by the desire that Estonia would one day become a Buddhist country. In later years he became more sceptical about that possibility and even expressed the opinion (or perhaps more accurately the hope) that the number of Buddhists in Estonia should not become too great, because Buddhist mass movements always have the risk of profanation, which is all too evident in traditional Buddhist countries and in the present-day West. In his view, Buddhism, as a deeply humanistic and knowledge-based culture, should be fed by ancient religious texts and their contemporary scholarly interpretations. Buddhism should primarily be high culture or elite culture, as was once the case in India. For that purpose, Buddhist education and Buddhist scholars are necessary. When it was

not possible to train them at the university, he created alternative possibilities. In the 1990s Mäll founded the Mahāyāna Institute in Tartu, which organised language instruction and textological seminars, thereby providing Buddhist higher education at quite a high level. Unfortunately the Mahāyāna Institute's activities came to an end a few years later, but Buddhist education obtained new energy at the beginning of the next decade, when a new institution bearing the same name was founded—this was then renamed the Estonian Institute of Buddhism—and it operates under that name to this day. Mäll's publishing activities were even more important. He established the translation series 'Budismi pühad raamatud' (Sacred Books of Buddhism) and the publishing house that printed it—Lux Orientis. Three volumes of the 'Sacred Books of Buddhism' containing his own translations appeared during his lifetime. On several occasions he expressed the hope that if 1000 volumes of that series appeared in the following 300 years, then the main body of Buddhist culture would have been made available in Estonia. In comparison with the translation of Buddhist texts into Tibetan and Chinese, for instance, that time frame is not overly long, and the volume of the anticipated result is not too great. With his characteristic comprehensiveness, he did not limit himself to the translation of Buddhist texts in his last years. Only a few months before his death, a new and updated translation of Confucian texts was published, and this is also the first volume of the 'Treasury of Chinese Thought', a new series of classical translations. The preparation of the new edition of Laozi's *Daodejing* remained unfinished and will now have to be published by his students. The same applies to the continuation of both series with new translations, but even more importantly the preparation of new translators.

The trace left behind by a person is sometimes compared to the trace of a bird in the sky, of a fish in water, or of a lizard on a stone. In the Mahāyāna texts it is sometimes stated that the Bodhisattva does good deeds in a dream-like world. Perceiving from his higher level of understanding the imaginary and unreal nature of this world, he nevertheless continues to act untiringly, because he cannot do otherwise. His mission, which comes from within, is to help all. To help transcend the suffering of this world, which appears to be so real, but to the knower is unreal. The main means of transcending and becoming free of suffering is knowledge. Knowledge is acquired through education and culture. Here the objective and ideal of Buddhism—the release from suffering—meets the truth repeated in the West in different times by different men: education makes one free.

Linnart Mäll devoted his life to the realisation of that ideal.

Märt LÄÄNEMETS, Tartu University